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ABSTRACT

After the position of career education (CE) coordinator was eliminated from the Arlington, Virginia, Public Schools budget for 1998 and 1999, two surveys were conducted to determine the status of CE in local public schools. The first survey was sent to all 37 principals in the district (response rate, 68%). The second survey, which was sent to random samples of 10 teachers, counselors, and librarians in each of the district's 37 buildings, elicited 57 responses (from 48 teachers, 8 counselors, and 1 librarian) from 18 schools and the career center. Although most of the principals appeared to understand the CE concept, the principal survey revealed unmet needs what would have been the purview of the CE coordinator, including staff development, assistance with infusion techniques, and contacting businesses. Some excellent examples of CE were reported by those responding to the second survey; however, none of those surveyed were aware of the state mandate for and state definition of CE. Although the survey sponsors recommended that the position of CE coordinator be reinstated as a full-time position and that the Arlington school board provide clear direction for implementation of CE in all curriculum areas in grades K-12, the district's board of education refused to reinstate the position of CE coordinator. (MN)

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American Association For Career Education

AACE Distinguished Member Series on Career Education

Stumbling Blocks for Career Education: School Board, Administration, and the Ever-Tightening Budget

Polly Liss

The position of Career Education Coordinator was eliminated from the 1998 and the 1999 Arlington, Virginia, Public Schools budgets. Members of the Arlington County Coalition for Career Education were concerned that sequential Career Education activities, mandated by the state for infusion K-12, will diminish in the local public schools without central leadership.

In an effort to find out how Career Education is faring in Arlington Public Schools, the Coalition surveyed all Arlington principals at the end of the 1997-98 school year. In the summer of 1998, the Coalition conducted an additional survey of teachers, counselors, and librarians. As a result of these surveys, the Coalition made the following requests:

1. The Coalition asks for the reinstatement of a full-time position of Career Education Coordinator in the 1999-2000 Arlington school-year budget.
2. The Coalition requests that the School Board provide in 1999 clear direction for the implementation of Career Education in all curriculum areas, K-12.

Survey of Principals

All site administrators (37) in the school system were surveyed. Accompanying the questionnaire were an explanatory cover letter, excerpts from the Virginia *Standards of Quality*, the state definition of Career Education, and the state competencies for Career Education. There was a 68% return for the following survey questions:

1. What clarification, if any, do you need of the mandate for or definition of Career Education?
2. What expectations do you communicate to staff about the implementation of Career Education in their curriculum areas, counseling, library?
3. Do you think all members of your staff understand the concept of Career Education and how each can implement it? ❑ Yes ❑ No What percentage of your staff do you think is carrying out Career Education?
4. How is Career Education implemented in your school?
5. What kind of help do you need to assist staff in the implementation of Career Education?
6. What difficulties do you foresee in the future without a central coordinator?

Most of Arlington Public Schools' principals appear to understand the Career Education concept and take a leadership role to encourage implementation of the concept within their buildings. Major role players identified in implementation are teachers and counselors, who carry out Career Education activities within their curricula and in collaboration with the community. Librarians supplement their efforts with appropriate resources, where possible.

However, results of the survey conducted by the Coalition clearly show that staff needs are not being met in many areas crucial to full and continuing integration of Career Education within the curriculum at all grade levels. Areas of need include ongoing staff development training, assistance with infusion techniques relevant to Virginia's new Standards of Learning (SOLs) in a variety of curricular areas, curriculum development, print and video resources for staff and students, and contacts and partnerships within the business community to enhance both adult and student understanding of the world of work in Arlington and beyond. These areas should be in the purview of a central Career Education Coordinator. Without such a position, principals predict a "leadership void," with "diminished resources" and "no one to focus efforts" in the future, and support the

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schools in their efforts to assure that all Arlington students will, in fact, be able to "apply learning to the world beyond the classroom."

One principal said, "The success of most programs is dependent on the leadership provided. Appropriate leadership helps to maintain the focus, provides the resources necessary, and acts as a point of contact. Without a Central Coordinator, the emphasis will diminish, and the available expertise may not exist."

It is notable that some respondents do not feel that the local system provides specific directives for implementation of Career Education, especially at the elementary level. Some administrators stated they do not believe that Career Education is applicable to their curricula. Others indicated that Career Education has had to take a back seat in their schools to the increased emphasis on meeting the new SOLs. None were aware of the 1997 Department of Education publication, *Career Pathways*, that clearly shows the connection between Career Education and the SOLs and makes many specific suggestions for meeting SOLs through Career Education.

Survey of Teachers, Counselors, and Librarians

The purpose of this survey was to verify the understanding and use by teachers, counselors, and librarians of the concept of Career Education in each curriculum area, and to identify the difficulties they anticipate without a central Career Education Coordinator. Each of the 37 principals was sent 10 copies of the survey and a cover letter to distribute to a random selection of teachers, counselors, and librarians in their schools. Fifty-seven responses were received from 48 teachers, 8 counselors, and 1 librarian. The information came from 18 schools (49%)--12 elementary, 3 middle and 2 high schools--and the Career Center. The questions posed were:

1. What clarification, if any, do you need of the state mandate for or definition of Career Education? What does Career Education mean to you?
2. How do you implement Career Education with your students? (Please give some specific examples of activities.)
3. What relationship do you see between the SOLs and Career Education?
4. What kind of information or help do you need to implement Career Education? To whom do you go in your school for this assistance? How might a central Career Education Coordinator assist you?
5. What difficulties do you foresee in the future, for yourself or for the schools in general, without a central coordinator?

It was striking that none of the professionals surveyed were aware of the existence of the state mandate for and the state definition of Career Education, although these documents have existed for decades. There were, however, some excellent examples of Career Education activity by those surveyed. Such illustrations were certainly not universal. Some respondents apparently understand the concept of Career Education, some have partial understanding or no understanding, some think it is Vocational Education, and some think it applies only to the level they teach or that it applies only to a different level, and some admit they just don't know. None commented that they use Career Education to relate one curriculum to another--an important element of the concept that helps students understand linkages that underlie interrelationships in school and such applications beyond school walls.

Even among those who gave excellent examples of Career Education activities, there is recognition of the need for continuing help from a central source. A number of respondents see a relationship between the SOLs and Career Education and see enhanced meaning in content areas with the integration of Career Education. Still others pointed out that, while Career Education applies to all students, it is especially helpful to minority students and to the special student population. The diversity of understandings evident in these responses emphasizes the need for reinstatement of the position of Career Education Coordinator and for clear direction for the implementation of Career Education in all curriculum areas, K-12.

School Board Response

At the end of February, a letter was received from the School Board chair, saying:

> Thank you for your recent letter and appearance before the School Board in support of restoration of the Career Education Coordinator position in the fiscal year 2000 budget. All School Board members received a copy of your

> letter and the accompanying article from *Business First* ["Viewpoint: Schools, Employers Must Do Better Jobs," by Donald Clark, Western New York's Business Newspaper for the week of April 13, 1998] . . . . Thank you again for writing. Your comments are helpful to us as we continue to deliberate on the budget, and we appreciate your interest and support of Arlington's public schools.

And then, in response to my later plea in May 1999:

> Thank you for your e-mail regarding the Career Education Coordinator position. All School Board members have received a copy of your e-mail with my response. As you know, this position was not funded in the fiscal year 2000 Budget. Unfortunately, while many valuable programs are recommended by staff and citizens, given the reality of budgetary constraints, we are unable to fund them all. Thank you for writing and speaking before the Board on this issue. We sincerely appreciate your advocacy and work on behalf of Arlington's students.

And so, the issue of funding the Career Education Coordinator position is dead.

Author Comment

Three appearances were made before the School Board to solicit the support of its members for the recommendations made. It is acknowledged that the Board has many heavy considerations, especially in meeting the mandates of the SOLs. The Coalition has had a 21-year struggle with the administration and the Board both in regard to helping each to understand the concept of Career Education and urging both to accept local responsibility for meeting the state mandate for its implementation. Initially, at the behest of the Coalition, the local school system applied for and accepted funds from the federal government (under the Career Education Incentive Act) and later from the state; however, it took 11 years for the school system to put a line item in the school budget for a full-time Career Education Coordinator. Although secure for a while, in the last 4 years, the position has had to be defended by organizations and individuals who pleaded for the retention of the position. The last 2 years met with defeat.

The observation of this author is that the concept of Career Education is not fully understood by the constantly changing membership of the School Board, as well as by many key school administrators. Education of these persons is an ongoing and often futile task. As with other political offices, short-term solutions are often more favored than long-term solutions, even though the latter may offer better ways to deal with identified needs. That is the case with Career Education. It is an uphill battle to beat these odds.

Contacts have been made with School Board candidates, local and state politicians, and school-concerned publications in regard to the need for their support. Unfortunately, while they appear to be receptive, they do not commit themselves by speaking or writing where it counts. It is not impossible, but it is certainly difficult to convince administrators and Board members that, as a budget item, Career Education is not just an expense, it is a basic step to prepare students for their future lives.

Even though there is no budgetary support for a Career Education Coordinator position, the second recommendation made by the Coalition should not be a budget consideration: To provide "clear direction for the implementation of Career Education in all curriculum areas, K-12."

That is being pursued.

Polly Liss is Founder and President of the Arlington County Coalition for Career Education, Member of the Virginia Career Education Advisory Committee, and Treasurer of the American Association for Career Education.

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